



Bonnard in January

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Dougal McKenzie

Bonnard in January

The staircase leading up to the restaurant from the Large South Room had not been mopped since lunchtime, and residue from the snow covered shoes of visitors who had passed that way already, whether going straight to the exhibition or, as was the case with Peter, heading first for afternoon tea, had left the steps dangerously slippery.

This did not overly concern Peter, however; if anything, it gave him a greater sense of the over-all adventure of visiting the exhibition. He had timed his visit that late Wednesday afternoon very purposely, imagining that taking high tea beforehand would somehow chime with the Bonnard paintings he was going to see. Peter was already aware of the painter's many canvases featuring accouterments of the dining table, and he had decided some weeks ago that taking high tea was probably as close an English equivalent he could make to the feeling of these works.

Peter had studied Bonnard very closely over the years, mainly through reproductions (and most of them in black and white), but had managed to come to the conclusion that he was a soulful painter, concerned with light's atmosphere and effects- not achieved through the scientific method of the Impressionists, but tackled in a more physical and emotional manner. Bonnard's paintings of his wife, in the bathroom of their house at Le Cannet, perhaps best captured this, Peter thought.

Peter also understood Bonnard to be a great colourist and imagined that, even from the black and white illustrations he knew so well, there was something almost delectable about his paintings. A late luncheon would make his stomach (and his mind) too heavy to take in the exhibition properly, Peter had decided; tea and cake would prepare him in a much better way for the two hours he intended to spend walking around the exhibition.

With all of this in mind, Peter entered the restaurant of Messrs. Ring and Brymer, Ltd., at the Royal Academy of Arts in Piccadilly.

He chose one of the smaller tables, for two, at the far end of the room, to give himself as wide a vista as possible of all the comings-and-goings in the restaurant. He placed his carefully folded overcoat, then scarf and canvas hat, on the opposite chair, thinking it unlikely he would spot anyone else who may want to join him.

Martha he knew had already visited the exhibition, on the first Thursday of its opening, and in any case she normally visited the restaurant for afternoon tea on Tuesdays. She followed this routine fairly habitually, before going to Mr. Gatt's drawing class, always leaving promptly at a quarter to five in order to give herself time to make the ten minute walk to Bourdon Street, where his art group met.

It was here Peter had first seen Martha, just before Christmas 1964, at the last of Mr. Gatt's drawing classes of the year. Peter had joined the group belatedly that term, prompted not only by an article on Bonnard's drawing given to him by his friend Edward Vardey, but also an advertisement for the drawing classes placed in the window of Bowers and Sons' art shop. Why

Edward had not already told him about the drawing classes that he himself had been attending for some weeks, Peter was not sure of at first, but in any case it had been the descriptions in the article about Bonnard's approaches to drawing, and the coincidence of seeing Mr. Gatt's classes advertised in Bowers and Sons' window, which had prompted Peter to join the group.

The art shop was also on Bourdon Street, and Peter often frequented it on Saturdays; however, on the particular Saturday that Peter noticed the advertisement for the drawing class, he was not initially intending to call in.

"Drawing from Memory and Imagination, with Mr. W. Gatt, R.A.",

the little card announced in the shop window. Peter had immediately turned back towards the art shop's entrance, and after looking around with some consideration, decided to purchase a new set of drawing pencils and a small canvas-backed sketchbook. On the front inside cover of this he had written down the address and time of Mr. Gatt's class, noting now, as he sat in Messrs. Ring and Brymer, Ltd., that the price on the menu card for afternoon tea was 5 shillings, precisely the same cost of attending "Drawing from Memory" on Tuesday evenings.

Peter had responded to the idea of Mr. Gatt's class straight away when he turned up that first evening before Christmas. It was exactly as he had hoped, necessitating an approach very similar to Bonnard's method of painting. The classes relied heavily on imagination, as having observed the set-up arranged by Mr. Gatt, and with the subject matter subsequently hidden

from view, the class was instructed to draw from memory. It was a radical idea, and to begin with not to everyone's taste in the art group.

Although Peter entered into the spirit of it without hesitation, he never quite had the confidence to ask Mr. Gatt if the idea was taken from Bonnard's approach to painting, and to begin with it felt like something they both shared a private interest in, without feeling the necessity to share it openly with the rest of the group.

Peter knew that Edward must have made the connection himself also, and suspected that this was one of the reasons why he had not told Peter about the drawing class in the first place. For a time, it seemed to exist as an unsaid piece of important knowledge, shared privately between the three of them.

Eventually, the rest of the group came to see the interest within Mr. Gatt's method also. The classes consisted of still lifes (or "nature mortes", as Mr. Gatt preferred to call them) made up of plastic fruits set around various coloured objects, with patterned drapery and directional lighting creating added visual interest. Along with Martha, who modeled, this was all set up for the class to observe for around twenty-five minutes.

Occasionally, the arrangement was supplemented with a bouquet or two brought by Martha. Although they always looked a little past their best, the care with which Martha placed the flowers within the composition had everyone joking that somehow she managed to breath life and colour back into them.

Mr. Gatt added to the mood by playing records on his Dansette (usually something by Debussy or Satie), with the class free to chat and smoke as

they moved around the room, looking at the set-up from different angles. It was important, Mr. Gatt always insisted, that Martha perform quick, short poses and also look at the arrangement of objects herself. Martha did not smoke as it happened, but had she been inclined to, Peter was sure this would have been encouraged by Mr. Gatt as well.

Following the first part of the class, Mr. Gatt proceeded to pull a muslin curtain across the small, moveable stage where the arrangement was set up, and the class then drew from memory. The slight transparency of the curtain, lit as it was from behind, allowed for a vague sense of what was still there. Martha, although paid for two hours modeling, would dress again or pull on a robe, and draw with the rest of the class. Peter remembered how they had laughed about this afterwards, when Martha remarked that not only was she paid to model, but she also had the opportunity to draw for free as well.

Mr. Gatt would comment encouragingly on everyone's efforts, and the class always finished promptly at seven fifteen. As a new member of the group Peter followed the habit of his friend Edward, leaving with him almost immediately after the class had concluded, down the steep staircase from the drawing studio which led directly out onto Bourdon Street. Peter had wondered if Martha stayed behind to help tidy-up as part of her modeling duties, but after one particular class early on in the New Year, the three found themselves leaving together at the same time.

As they filed down the narrow staircase, Peter had wondered what Martha made of him. Had she taken to notice the new blue tweed cap he was wearing? He had been looking for a white canvas hat, like the one Bonnard wore in Cartier-Bresson's photographs of the artist taken at his house 'Le

Bosquet', but Peter soon discovered that this must have been very much a South of France thing, unlikely to be found in any of London's hat departments. As Martha had not seemed to notice his new blue cap, Peter determined to keep looking for the canvas hat, certain that it would catch her eye more readily and perhaps offer an opportunity to discuss Bonnard at length.

That particular evening however, walking out onto Bourdon Street, Peter, Edward and Martha agreed they should go to a coffee bar to discuss each other's drawings.

The canvas hat he did eventually find, in an anglers' shop in Canterbury on a weekend's excursion by train. It sat as a reminder of all of this now on the chair opposite him in the restaurant, on top of his overcoat, peaking ever so slightly above the table's edge. Peter realised he had not yet ordered anything for afternoon tea, and it was now almost a quarter past five. The exhibition was open until eight on Wednesdays and he still wanted to spend at least a good two hours looking around, and so when the waitress came to take his order, he said he would take a piece of Oxford lunch cake and a pot of Fortnum and Mason's gunpowder tea, for one.

Looking around the restaurant Peter saw that it had started to empty-out, with the tables being cleared and set up in readiness for morning coffee the next day. He did not feel under pressure however to hurry his tea and cake, and enjoyed observing the rituals now being undertaken by the restaurant staff. The cake stands, cups and saucers, tea and coffee pots were being taken away on trollies, the napkins collected up, and the white

tablecloths removed to be replaced with clean ones. Peter noted that some of the tables had pale blue napkins, whilst others had bright yellow ones.

His was set with a pale blue napkin, which he spread across his lap to catch any crumbs. Deciding to take out his little canvas-backed sketchbook and to set this on his lap also, he considered again each of the drawings from Mr. Gatt's classes. Peter was suddenly struck by the pale blue border created by the napkin around the edges of the opened pages, and it occurred to him that he may like to add a little colour to these drawings later on.

He began to note on the inside back cover of the sketchbook his perceptions of the colours in the restaurant. The very diffused grey light that had been coming in through the net curtains across the windows when he arrived, had turned to darkness outside now, and the electric lighting in the restaurant gave everything an increased yellowed shade.

For the yellow napkins, Peter noted: "Lemon Yellow/ Gamboge"; for the pale blue ones: "King's Blue/ Italian Green Umber". The vivid maroon aprons of the waiting staff he recorded as: "Madder Lake/ Mars Yellow". One of the waitress's hair, tightly packed in a bun slightly to the back of her head to allow for her matching maroon headpiece, had the same chestnut brown sheen as Martha's, and Peter approximated this to: "Van Dyke Brown/ Ultramarine Violet/ Raw Sienna. With the day's snow still in his mind, Peter imagined each of these colours set against a Flake White background on canvas, and wondered if the time had come for him to translate some of his drawings into paintings. He was sure that seeing Bonnard's paintings would inspire him to do so, yet he also felt a little trepidation at the thought.

Martha had already brought one of her paintings to Mr. Gatt's class, where it was keenly debated by the group for its mainly abstracted forms and use of colour. Peter had asked if she made it with any of the colours of Mr. Gatt's set-ups in mind, to which Martha had replied that she was more interested in the colours that surrounded everyone in the room. No one really knew what she meant by this, Mr. Gatt included, but it gave everyone cause for consideration. Peter had wondered what colour he was surrounded by in Martha's mind, but thought he would sound silly if he ventured to ask her this. He fancied that she saw him surrounded by Prussian Blue, probably because of the cap he had first worn to the class, whereas Martha, he had decided, was surrounded by Rose Dorée, and certainly moved with an ever-present, pearlescent floral air around her.

Martha's first visit to the exhibition on the opening Thursday (she was to return twice more in January) had been prompted by the eye-catching, orange-coloured advertisements posted around Piccadilly the preceding December. The snow, which had been threatening for most of the month, came at first in just a very few flakes, and these had caught Martha's eye against the vivid cadmium hue of the posters.

She thought of this now in the bathroom, out on the landing of her Charing Cross bedsit, trying to recall the colour sensations of the flickering white against the solid orange, not with her eyes closed, but instead looking directly at the royal blue tiles surrounding the bath.

The bathroom, like the drawing class, was an escape from the dingy atmosphere of her bedsit, and Martha considered it palatial compared to the

run-down nature of her living quarters. It was the main reason she had decided to take the bedsit in the first place; moreover, the savings in rent she made meant she had a little extra for things such as afternoon tea on Tuesdays, and the flowers she always liked to have in the bathroom.

She didn't mind at all that it was shared with another bedsit on the other side of the stairs. The bathroom always felt like her own private space, with the light from the frosted window above the tap end of the bath a revitalizing force in itself. For this reason Martha only ever bathed during daylight hours, all the year round, and it was here that she got most of her ideas for her paintings. These came not so much from the bathroom setting itself, but by the way the light from the window, and the reflections from the bath water, surrounded her and the flowers, materialising through the steam. Martha had considered explaining her method to the group, but other than speaking in general terms about the way she saw colour surrounding things, she had decided to keep the particular details to herself.

Peter and Edward were surrounded by Prussian Blue she decided, they were both so serious, and she considered Prussian Blue to be a serious colour. They would never truly understand Bonnard's painting for this reason she concluded. His was a world of Bonnard Blue, the same blue she saw reflected in the water, and in the air surrounding her and the flowers. Taking in these effects, Martha decided that she needed to buy a green towel, as close as possible to Permanent Green Light, which she would spread on the chair at the foot of the bath.

The temperature was cooling considerably now Martha realised- she had used up all the hot water, and as this was the only source of heat, she

had no option but to towel herself dry, bit by bit, as she emerged from the bath. As she did so, Martha reflected on the events following the last drawing class.

Her intention had been to ask Peter and Edward if they wished to go along with her to see the Bonnard exhibition, and she had been going to do so at their final visit to the coffee bar following the last of Mr. Gatt's classes, before Christmas 1965.

It had been an odd occasion at the café however. The usual wide ranging discussions about art, which had been flourishing at the art group since others had gained the confidence to bring their painting efforts from home, were not being continued at the café this particular evening. Edward appeared particularly dejected, Martha was not sure why, and Peter seemed to have something on his mind as well. Martha tried to initiate a conversation, saying that she had read a great review of a Patrick Procktor exhibition in Studio International at the weekend, and was sorry she had missed his show at the Redfern Gallery during the summer. Edward had said he didn't know the artist, whilst Peter almost seemed to be about to say something, before stopping short. Martha still felt compelled to tell them something about Procktor's work, but then stopped short too, knowing that neither Edward nor Peter were in the mood.

She had made her mind up there and then to see the Bonnard exhibition on her own. They must have seen the orange banners around Piccadilly too, she thought, you couldn't miss them whichever way you approached Bourdon Street, and there were the same orange posters advertising the exhibition on the Underground as well. It entered Martha's

mind that each of them had the forthcoming exhibition in their thoughts at that very moment, yet Peter and Edward were not prepared to share the information between the three of them. This had made Martha very angry, it was preposterous, and she got up quite abruptly, saying she would see them both at the first class in the New Year and to have a nice Christmas.

As the door of the café closed, Peter regretted not having said that he had in fact enjoyed the Procktor exhibition that summer, regretted more that he had not asked Martha if she would like to visit the Bonnard show together.

The same feeling of regret enveloped him now as he poured the remainder of his tea through the strainer, deciding to leave the last piece of cake on his plate. Martha entered the Large South Room at just after five thirty; the exhibition had been extremely busy on its opening day, and she was now looking forward to seeing the paintings with a better view. She hoped that the exhibition rooms would be a bit quieter during the late Wednesday opening, only to discover that, naturally, others like her were also taking the opportunity to see the show immediately after finishing work.

Disappointed to find the rooms quite crowded, Martha nevertheless pushed on determinedly and headed to see “La Baignoire”, which Bonnard had painted of her between 1938 and 1941.

As Peter shrugged on his overcoat, stuffing his scarf and canvas hat into a pocket on either side, he felt the expectation of the exhibition slipping away. Taking the stairs back down into the Large South Room and walking out into Piccadilly, he took out his hat and pulled it down over his brow.

Although the snow had now stopped falling, there was still a lot of white on the pavements, and Peter followed the grey tracks of footsteps back to the Underground station to take his train home. He would try to make a painting of Martha, from memory.